



Returning to the Herd

A 5th generation
farm girl comes home
to raise cattle

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

The Changing Role of Women
in Nebraska Agriculture

“You can’t take 350 cows
to the kennel...”

Gothenburg Sisters-in-Law
Grow Ag Careers

New Corn Specialty License
Plate Now Available

WINTER 2016
CornsTalk
A publication of the Nebraska Corn Board

We've all seen Grant Woods' famous "American Gothic" painting of the older farm couple, him with pitchfork in hand and her with the dour look—standing side by side in front of the small white farmhouse. That iconic image may have been accurate in its day (or not!), but today's farm couples and the family farms they operate are vastly different.

Today, farm women play a critical role in the success of a Nebraska family farm. They may work shoulder-to-shoulder with a husband or other family member on the farm—or they may be running the operation themselves. They also might have an off-the-farm job to help supplement income and insurance coverage—and in many cases, those jobs are related to agriculture.

And more and more young women are returning to Nebraska farms and ranches to raise their own families.

Farm women are driving tractors and grain carts, helping deliver newborn calves, selling pivot irrigation systems, managing ag loan portfolios, and advocating on behalf of their family farms and agriculture.

In this issue of *CornsTALK*, you'll meet a handful of Nebraska farm women who are continuing their family legacy—and bringing their special talents, passion and insight to their family farms and to the agricultural community.



Married to brothers, Becky (left) and Jana (right) Jobman are growing their careers in the agricultural community.

See related story on page 6.

“I’ve never struggled with people saying that farming is a man’s job.” —Jessie Portenier Ruppert



Harvard Family Welcomes Fifth-Generation Daughter Back to the Farm



As a young girl growing up on a farm near Harvard, Nebraska, Jessie Portenier Ruppert didn't get to enjoy extended family vacations with her parents and three sisters. A camping trip meant sleeping out under the stars in the pasture and fishing in the farm pond. Attending a high school basketball game was only possible if the cattle were fed first.

So after what some would view as a “deprived” childhood, why would this young woman decide to return to the family farm after graduating from college—to manage her own herd of cattle?

Because she loves it.

“You could just see her passion as a young girl. Whether it was running the tractor or working calves, she was just a natural,” said Jessie’s mother, Sharon. “It’s just been kind of a given that Jessie was going to be our farmer.”

Jessie is the fifth generation in her family to become a farmer. She began her college career as a criminal justice major, but soon realized that her heart was in agriculture while working part-time at a feedlot during college. “I love being outdoors and just couldn’t see myself being in an office with a lot of people,” Jessie said. “Just being around cattle comforts me.”

After enrolling in the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) in Curtis, Jessie’s dad, Kif, presented her with the opportunity to buy a small herd of cows following graduation.

Because of her hands-on experience of working with cattle, many of Jessie’s college classes at NCTA were a review of what she already knew. “But I was especially grateful for the business classes that taught me how to create spreadsheets to manage cash flow and set up recordkeeping for my cows,” she said.

In addition to the farm near Harvard, the Portenier family has a ranch near Elwood, Nebraska. Jessie’s cattle, as well as those owned by her father, are located there from early spring until after corn harvest. “During the summer I spend most of my time at the ranch caring for the cows and calves—checking their health, getting them mineral to supplement the nutrition in their forage nutrition, and so forth.”

While Jessie is focused primarily on the beef side of the family operation, she’s also always ready to step up when her parents need help with the crops—taking seed to the field during planting, putting out irrigation pipe, and hauling grain.

The corn crop is a critical component in the family’s beef business. Having both crops and cattle helps diversify the family operation. During the winter months, the cattle are transported from the Elwood ranch to the farm near Harvard to graze on cornstalks. This is also where calving takes place in February.

Jessie has a special place in her heart for cattle, but she points out they are not companion animals like the cats and dogs on the farm. “We care for and love the cattle we raise, but it’s important to understand that we are in this to raise beef. That’s the way we’ve chosen to generate the income we need to provide for ourselves,” Jessie said.

Jessie has learned that the business aspects of beef production are critical to success. “Marketing is perhaps the most important thing a corn producer or cattle producer needs to understand,” Jessie said. “I sold cattle for the first time last year when the market was at an all-time high, so that was exciting. But I also know that won’t be the case every year.”

So what’s it like being a young woman in what is typically thought of as a “man’s world”?

“We have definitely always been a family farm and we never really had any hired help,” Jessie said. “It was just dad, mom and us four girls. Everyone in the area talked about ‘Kif and his girl crew’ because that’s just what it was. So I’ve never struggled with people saying that farming is a man’s job.”

Jessie was married this past November to a young farmer and rancher from the McCook area, and the couple is working out the details of helping both of their families with their operations that are 150 miles apart. “If you want to be able to see your husband, you need to go out and spend time with him doing what he’s doing,” she said. “My mom has been dad’s right-hand since they’ve been married. That’s what I watched growing up and that’s what I have always wanted.”

Calving and harvest favorite times for

A fourth-generation farmer in her family, Sharon Portenier was raised near Guide Rock, Nebraska. “I loved it growing up, even though I didn’t get to run the tractor as much as I would have liked since I had brothers,” she said.

After marrying her husband Kif, they relocated to the Harvard farm that had been in his family for nearly 100 years. Other than a brief clerical stint filling in for a friend on maternity leave, Sharon has always worked on the farm. She handles the bookkeeping as well as helping with calving and harvest. On top of all that, she does laundry, cleans house, prepares meals and does the yardwork. The mother of four daughters, Sharon has instilled a strong work ethic in her children.

“We’re a family farm and we always made sure our girls understood that it takes the entire family to make it work,” said Sharon, whose daughter Jessie is also featured in this edition of *CornsTALK*. “The calves needed to be fed before they could go to the basketball game; there were things to do before we could move onto the fun stuff.”

At the same time, Sharon knows that her girls were able to have a life filled with great memories. “The girls got to take lunch out to the field to their dad and grandpa. We used to go camping out in the pasture where we had a pond stocked with fish. And I was there to see them off to school and pick them up at the school bus almost every day,” she said. “We were able to make the afternoon school programs and athletic events.”

As third-oldest daughter Jessie returns to the farm, Sharon appreciates having the additional help, especially with the cattle operation. “Owning livestock is a daily commitment. If you want to take a short vacation, you just can’t take 350 cows to the kennel to have someone else take care of them,” Sharon said.

Calving starts in February and Nebraska’s severe winter weather is typically a challenge to the newborn calves. “There have been many times that my husband and I will just stay in the pickup on a cold, wintry night and drive around every half hour or so to see if there’s a new baby calf out there somewhere,” she said. “If it’s wet and cold, it’s vital that you scoop them up and get them to the barn where they can be warm and dry to avoid getting sick.”

“That’s another great benefit of having Jessie around—to help during this very busy time of year.”

Like her daughter, Sharon is committed to providing the best care for the cattle they raise, while also understanding that some animals are raised for food. “You certainly get attached to the animals, but yet you’re distanced from them,” Sharon said. “They’re on our farm for a purpose—to put meat on people’s tables.”

Calving and harvest are Sharon’s two favorite times of year. “Calving because we get to see those little babies being born and that new life is so good,” she said. “And harvest because you get to reap the benefits of an entire year’s work.”



Sharon Portenier.



Portenier Family

Sharon Portenier says people should not be afraid of their food.

And she's passionate about telling them why.

Sharon is a CommonGround volunteer who enjoys talking with others about her family farm and how they raise the crops and animals on their farm near Harvard, Nebraska.

CommonGround is a national initiative supported in part with checkoff funds from the Nebraska Corn Board. CommonGround connects farm women with urban women in grocery stores, food shows and other events across America. While many CommonGround conversations take place in large urban areas, these conversations are also happening in Nebraska communities such as Grand Island, Norfolk and Hastings.

"The media is making many people feel as if what we're growing on our farms is going to harm them in some way," Sharon said. "We're fighting an uphill battle to convince consumers that we put the very same food on our tables that we are growing on our farms and they are putting on their tables."

To help tell her story, Sharon takes photos of her farm and family along with her to CommonGround events. "I want to show them what life is like and that family farms really do exist," she said.

Having her daughter Jessie return to the farm (see related story in this issue) has given Sharon more time to become an engaged advocate for agriculture.

"My husband also encouraged me to do this because we all want people to be aware of what we do on our farms and how and why we do it," she said.



Discover more at commongroundnebraska.com.

Working off the farm, but still in agriculture.



Becky Jobman of Gothenburg has leveraged her degree in agricultural engineering to help her farmer customers add pivot irrigation systems to their operations.

Being a woman in agriculture can extend well beyond the farm itself. Sisters-in-law Jana and Becky Jobman are a great example.

Jana Jobman is an ag loan officer with 1st State Bank of Gothenburg. Becky Jobman sells pivot irrigation systems for Landmark Water at its Lexington location.

Jana's husband David and Becky's husband Andy are brothers and fifth-generation farmers in Gothenburg, Nebraska.

Becky grew up on a small corn and soybean farm in Thayer County. Her parents moved to Nebraska from the East Coast to farm when Becky was an infant. Jana was raised on a six-generation cow-calf ranch on the edge of the Nebraska Sandhills near Arnold, living "the cowboy lifestyle" she says.

Becky started working for John Deere while in college and continued full-time after graduating with a degree in agricultural engineering. She also married Andy the year she graduated. During their first nine months as newlyweds, her career took her to Iowa and Kansas. She commuted back and forth on weekends as Andy farmed and

operated his agronomic consulting business in Gothenburg. When the opportunity arose for Becky to move back to central Nebraska to work for a local John Deere dealership, she jumped at it.

Jana graduated from the University of Nebraska with a degree in agricultural banking and finance. After working for an Omaha-based bank for a time, her employer agreed to allow her to live and work from home in Gothenburg after she married David. She recently joined 1st State Bank and now works out of the bank offices.

Jana enjoys the wide range of agricultural clients she serves—from feedlots to pork operations, from grain elevators to ethanol plants, from ag retailers to individual farming operations. "I love being involved in and keeping a finger on the pulse on the entire industry," she said. "People in agriculture are honest, trustworthy, real people—and I've always appreciated that."

In her new position, Jana will also work with community business owners. "Gothenburg is a progressive town that truly understands the meaning of 'community'," she said. "I really look forward to being even more involved in our community and contributing to its success."

Some farmers have initially been skeptical of working with a woman to purchase a new pivot irrigation system, but Becky has established credibility thanks to her education in college and on the job. “You don’t have to act like you know everything. If you’re open-minded and like to learn, you’ll succeed,” Becky said. “That’s been especially important to me as a woman in a nontraditional role.”

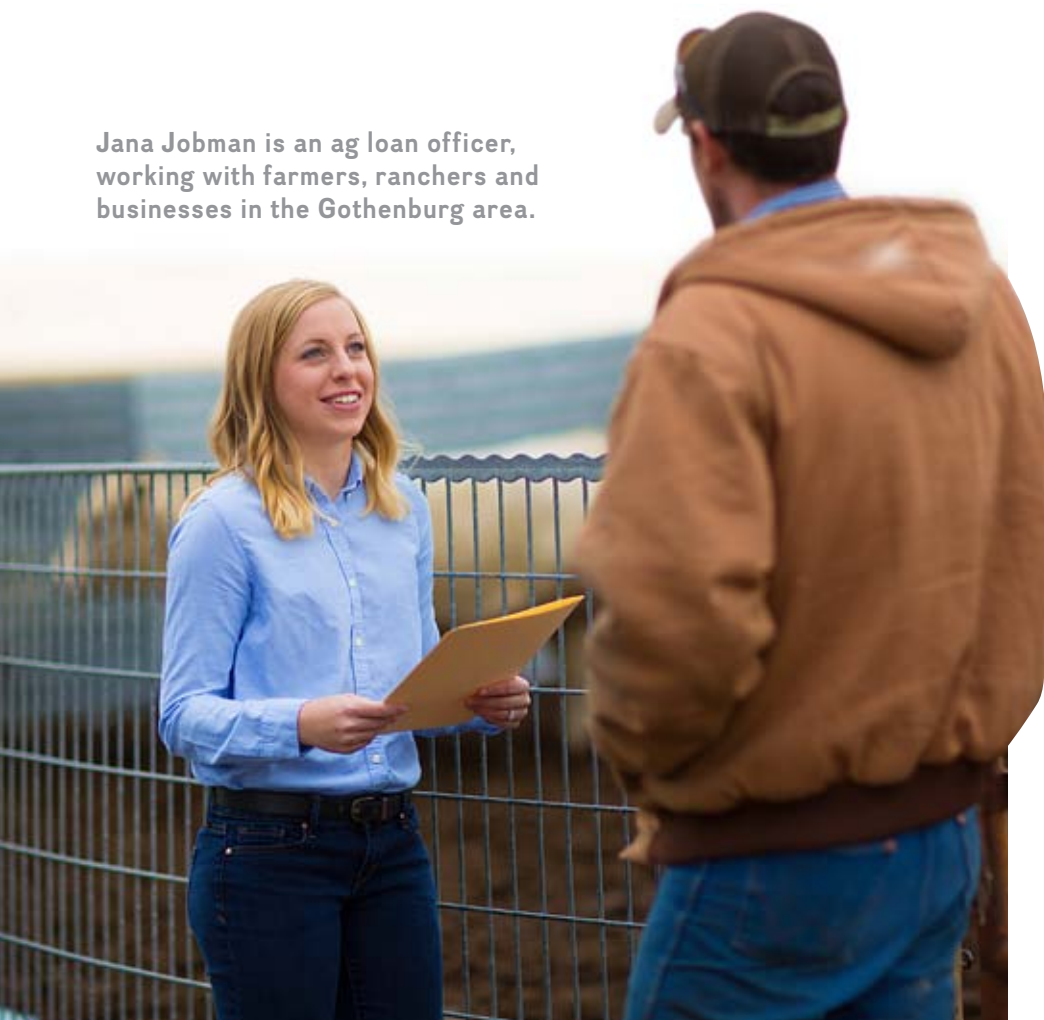
Their off-the-farm responsibilities still allow some time for Jana and Becky to help on the family farm as needed—irrigating, moving cattle, driving a grain cart during harvest or shuffling vehicles from one place to another.

Their day jobs also help them contribute to the success of their family farms. “Our entire family is really good at coming together and listening to each other when it comes to making a big purchase or setting direction for the operation,” Jana said. “My financial background and insight on the industry as a whole are beneficial when we’re making big decisions of this nature.”

Jana and Becky believe that there are great careers in agriculture for women, both on and off the farm. “Even a woman who doesn’t want to be directly involved in the agricultural field can still engage with farmers through careers in banking, insurance, healthcare, or law,” Jana added.

“If it’s the right company, they will totally support you regardless of gender,” Becky added. “If you’re a good fit for the job and you work diligently at it, then it will be a good experience for you. The biggest thing is to stay flexible and know what your unique skills and talents are.”

Jana Jobman is an ag loan officer, working with farmers, ranchers and businesses in the Gothenburg area.



Corn Specialty License Plate Now Available

Nebraska is known as the Cornhusker State—and now corn will become even more prominent as it is featured on a new specialty license plate available to the public.

The license plate, developed by the Nebraska Corn Growers Association (NeCGA), features a large golden ear of corn against a ready-to-harvest field and bright blue Nebraska sky.

Cost for the Nebraska Corn specialty license plate is \$70, which is in addition to the standard fees for licensing one’s vehicle in Nebraska. This additional fee is due with the initial application and is subject to annual renewal. Credit cards will be charged an additional five percent processing fee.

The Nebraska Corn license plates can be used on a wide range of vehicles and equipment including passenger vehicles, pickups, farm trucks, semi-trailers, motorcycles, trailers and mobile homes.

Customized “vanity” plate messages are not available, and the plates will not carry a county designation. The Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles will assign plate numbers as applications are submitted.

There is no limit to the number of Nebraska Corn specialty plates one can order.

NeCGA must gather a minimum of 500 applications with payment before the plates will be manufactured through the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles.

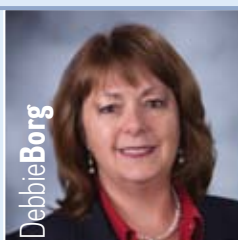
For an application form or to mail your completed application form with payment, contact NeCGA at 1111 Lincoln Mall, Suite 308, Lincoln, NE 68508. You can also call 402.438.6459 or email mwrch@necga.org.



Farm Women Ascend to Leadership Positions in Corn Organizations

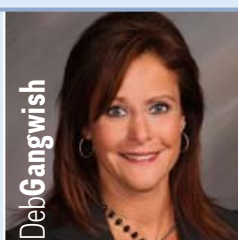
Farm women are taking their place with their male counterparts to lead the corn industry in times of challenge and opportunity. A few examples include:

Debbie Borg, an Allen, Nebraska farmer, was appointed as District 4 director on the Nebraska Corn Board in 2013. She serves as chair of the Nebraska Corn Board's research committee and is a member of the Grower Services Action Team of the National Corn Growers Association. She also served as a director on the Nebraska Soybean Association for 9 years.

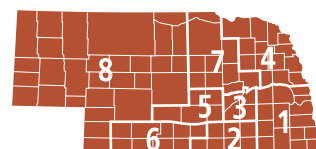


"Farmers—both men and women—need to use their skill set to show the nation and the world how we care about our land, our livestock and our crops, and the people we are producing food, fiber and fuel for," Debbie said. "According to credible statistics, women account for almost 85 percent of consumer spending in our country. Just by virtue of our gender, that means women in agriculture have a natural connection to the consumer, which gives us an urgent mission to share the positive story of agriculture in the consumer marketplace."

Deb Gangwish, a Shelton, Nebraska farmer, is the first woman in the Nebraska Corn Growers Association to be appointed to the board of directors since the organization was formed in 1972. Deb is a member of the current LEAD class and has recently challenged herself to becoming an even more active and involved advocate for agriculture in Nebraska. "I'm very excited to be engaged in agriculture at this level and I look forward to working with my fellow board members and other ag advocates to create opportunities for Nebraska's corn farmers," she said.



Pam Johnson, a Floyd, Iowa farmer, served as the first female president of the National Corn Growers Association during 2012-13. In that capacity she became the chief national spokesperson for America's corn farmers, testifying at Congressional hearings and representing the corn industry on national councils, organizations and initiatives. Prior to becoming NCGA president, Pam held a number of leadership and committee positions at the state and national levels.



District 1
Dave Bruntz
Friend, NE



District 6
Dennis Gengenbach
Smithfield, NE



District 2
John Greer
Edgar, NE



District 7
David Merrell
St. Edward, NE



District 3
Brandon Hunnicutt
Giltner, NE



District 8
Jon Holzfaster
Paxton, NE



District 4
Debbie Borg
Allen, NE



At-large
Alan Tiemann
Seward, NE



District 5
Tim Scheer
St. Paul, NE



Nebraska Corn Board members represent the eight districts indicated on the map and are appointed by the Governor. One at-large member is elected by the other Board members.

Nebraska Corn Board Staff

Kelly Brunkhorst
executive director



Boone McAfee
director of research



Emily Thornburg
director of communications



Roger Berry
director of market development



Janet Miller
business manager



Susan Zabel
administrative secretary



Facebook.com/NebraskaCornBoard
Twitter.com/NECornBoard
NebraskaCorn.blogspot.com

NebraskaCorn.org

Nebraska Corn Board
301 Centennial Mall South, Fourth Floor
Box 95107, Lincoln, Nebraska 68509
Phone 402/471-2676
Toll-Free 800/632-6761